



# Notes from Underground

Fyodor Dostoevsky

Study Guide



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Summary

**Part I, Chapters II–IV**

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## Summary: Chapter II

The Underground Man continues to describe himself. He is “overly conscious,” a “developed man” who possesses far more consciousness than is necessary for survival in the nineteenth century. Narrow-minded, active people, in contrast, have the perfect amount of consciousness of reality to go about their daily lives. The Underground Man explains that he does not mean to deride these active figures by suggesting that they are not as conscious as he is, but then he immediately admits that he takes pride in his “sickness” of consciousness. He describes how his consciousness, which makes him aware of “everything beautiful and lofty,” somehow inevitably drags him into corruption and “blight,” a blight in which he has gradually learned to take a sick pleasure.

The end result of this consciousness is always inertia. The Underground Man believes that degradation is inherent in his nature and therefore impossible to change, which affords him a degree of satisfaction. Another kind of strangled satisfaction comes from the fact that the Underground Man, even though he despises himself, considers himself more intelligent than everyone around him, and therefore feels responsible for everything that happens to him. This sense of responsibility, of course, also increases his misery, and makes his pride in his own intelligence a source of shame.

## Summary: Chapter III



The Underground Man further explains his inability to act in any directed fashion, whether magnanimously or vengefully. Once again, the problem is rooted in his self-consciousness. Normal men act immediately and blindly upon their instincts. In contrast to this kind of man, whom the Underground Man considers stupid but manly, the highly conscious Underground Man is nothing more than a mouse. While the normal man can perceive an act of revenge as an act of justice, the Underground Man, when wronged, is too conscious of the complexities of revenge to retaliate with genuine faith and confidence. Therefore, he ends up slinking back into his underground hole to dwell on whatever wrong has been done to him until it has almost consumed him.

A man of action follows his desire to act only until he is faced with definite impossibility, at which point he is reassured by the fact that further action will be useless. The Underground Man, however, claims that conscious men refuse to be reconciled with the laws of nature, science, and mathematics that other men take for granted. Even though the Underground Man is conscious of the reality of these laws, he refuses to agree with them if he does not like them.

## Summary: Chapter IV

"I'll be finding pleasure in a toothache!" you will exclaim, laughing.  
"Not? There is also pleasure in a toothache," I will answer.

[See Important Quotations Explained](#)

The Underground Man continues to illustrate the aesthetics of misery, demonstrating how the educated, conscious man of the nineteenth century can find pleasure even in a toothache. This

pleasure comes from the unnecessary, almost artistically embellished moans and groans that the man uses to signal to his family and friends that he has a toothache, as well as from his awareness that his family is disgusted and irritated with his displays of agony. After making this argument, the Underground Man responds to the laughter that he imagines he has elicited from his audience, and explains that his jokes are in bad tone because he does not respect himself: "[H]ow can a man of consciousness have the slightest respect for himself?"

## Analysis: Chapters II–IV

When the Underground Man implies that his great intelligence and heightened consciousness prevent him from being an "active man," saying that active people are always "disingenuous," he is rationalizing his inability to act. However, the fact that the Underground Man deludes himself about the source of his alienation does not mean that Dostoevsky necessarily wants to glorify the "man of action." Indeed, the novel criticizes equally those people who spend too much time contemplating the "beautiful and lofty" and those people who act decisively but blindly.

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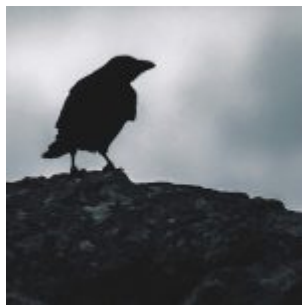
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## Notes

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#### The Underground Man: Character Analysis

CHARACTERS



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